

Inner Strength by oogonium

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Summary:

Kali has been staying at the Byers' house for a while.

Inner Strength

Author's Note:

I really think that if anyone was able to handle Will's coming out, Kali would be a pretty fitting role model. No one can tell me Kali Prasad is straight and not full of Pride™.

Kali has been staying at the Byers' house for about a week now. The Chief still doesn't trust her enough to show her the cabin and she knows for a fact Jane would never forgive her if she used her powers on the people she loves. So it's been a week. Joyce Byers continues to surprise her with the sheer amount of strength behind her eyes. She remembers the third night at the Byers; Kali still unwilling to acknowledge the family's existence, sulking on the living room couch, Joyce sitting down in front of her and asking- *demanding* - her attention. The full story of Will's disappearance and the painful year that followed, the countless nights of staying up near the phone, near the lights, near his bed, waiting for her son to come back to her. When she finally looks back up at Kali, there are angry tears in her eyes.

"We were hurt by those men too, and I know it's not the same as what you and El went through, but they hurt Will, and they hurt us too."

For a moment, Kali thinks about her own parents- all the way back in London. The people she barely remembers. But she realizes that she sees them in Joyce- that she now knows what they went through, what they suffered. She's surprised by the warmth of tears running down her cheeks. She can barely look at Joyce Byers, overcome with genuine shame for one of the first times in her life. Joyce leaves soon after that and while Kali isn't an expert at apologies just yet, she makes sure to help her in the kitchen that evening, she sets the table, she washes the dishes afterward and makes sure to bid each member of the Byers family goodnight before the lights go out. The soft smile Joyce gives her before she shuts her bedroom door fills a part of her she's refused to acknowledge for quite some time.

Kali has been staying at the Byers' house for two weeks. Joyce and Jane try their best to talk to the Chief but the work is slow and more often a sheer competition of stubbornness than any kind of logical discussion. With these particular "family" meals Kali makes sure to stay in the kitchen after dinner, taking comfort in the easy consistency of washing the dishes. If she notices that Jonathan does his best to stay out of the way by helping her dry, she doesn't say anything about it. They fall into a rhythm easily enough and neither of them finds the need to talk, happier in each other's silence than any ingenuine comment they might throw out in an effort to fill the gaps.

Once, Joyce and Hopper's discussion segues straight into nighttime-voices tense and hushed, they're too caught up in their arguing to realize that Kali and Jonathan can still hear them from the kitchen.

"Hop, she's a *child* ."

"She's a murder, Joyce. Don't act like she isn't."

Kali feels Jonathan wince beside her, she just keeps scrubbing the saucepan she's working on. It looks like they've run out of plates to wash.

"What if El was in her place? Huh? Would you still say that about her?"

"Don't you *dare* drag El into this. Don't. You. *Dare*."

She passes over the pan and watches quietly as he dries it off and sets it on the rack with the rest of the evening's dishes. They look at each other for a moment, both unsure about what to do.

He breaks the silence first. "I don't think Hopper's being fair. I'm sorry."

She shrugs, "He's not lying. I have killed people. I am a murderer."

He looks down again, trying to find the words to respond, but before he can,

"I am not sorry for what I've done."

Having said this, Kali refuses to look away from him. She knows, as solidly as she knows her powers, that she means this with her entire being.

"For a while, I thought I should have been. I worried that my apathy meant that they had taken something from me- something human." She unplugs the sink and begins to wipe down the sides of the counter.

"I soon realized that I was wrong. Those men deserved to die, and no matter how hard I looked within I knew I would never regret it." As she looks up at Jonathan she takes a moment to absorb the details of his posture, stiff and pensive, caught between agreement and confusion. She squeezes the sponge out and sets everything back in its place.

"I have learned, however, that the answer to my pain is no longer blood, and I sincerely believe it never again will be."

They make eye contact for a few brief moments before he nods, just once. It's remarkable how Joyce's strength shines through in her son's eyes.

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Kali has been living with the Byer's for a month when she sees the note peeking out of Will's backpack. She tries to convince herself that it's none of her business. That he's not her family to worry about. That it's not the beginning of a slur. He walks into the living room just as she's smoothed it out onto the table- far too late for her to pretend that anything different is happening. A tense silence fills the room.

"Does your mother know about this?"

Will silently shakes his head. "She knows the kids tease me. She knows it's what Lonnie used to say about me."

"Who's Lonnie?"

At this, he seems to shrink into himself, "My dad." he whispers.

Kali feels her blood boil. She sees her hands setting the paper ablaze and from the look on Will's face, he sees it as well. They both know the note is still there, though, still as tangible as any stranger's sneer. As real as the threat carried by words just like this one. So instead, Kali crumples it up, she smashes it between her palms and then crushes it under the sole of her boot for good measure.

"Let me tell you something," she says, placing her hands on both of his shoulders and holding onto him tightly.

"No matter what anyone says, what matters most is what *you* think. That and that alone is what should make you wake up every day, not what they might say, not what they might think. No matter what they do, they're wrong."

He doesn't look up at her when he whispers, "What if they're right?" and she feels her heart sink because it's just as if she were reliving her own experiences all over again.

"Gay or straight, they're never going to be right," she nudges his chin up, "if normal people knew about kids like me or kids like Jane, they'd call us monsters. They'd try to keep us away from society, try to deny that there was anything human about us. But that is because they don't understand, and they *never* will." To hide the shaking in her voice (and to hide the tears forming in her eyes) she pulls him into a hug.

"Will, there is something *magical* inside you. Something just as human and just as natural as anyone else, but so so special. And there are so many people out there who are ready to hurt you for it, but you can't let them."

She pulls away to look at him once more.

"Because there are going to be just as many people ready to love you and support you, and so many of them are already here."

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When she drops off the newspaper clippings of the Stonewall Riots, of the work of Bayard Rustin, Kali sees a little bit of Joyce in Will's eyes-but more than that, she sees something that is all his own.